



South Sudan
Human Rights Defenders
Network (SSHRDN)

ENDANGERED VOICES IN THE ELECTION STREAM

Empirical Research on perceived election fears and primary protection concerns South Sudan's human rights defenders including women and persons with disabilities have with regards to upcoming general elections in 2026.





ENDANGERED VOICES IN THE ELECTION STREAM

‘Fear is the beginning of Knowledge’

As paraphrased from the book of Proverbs in the bible. (Proverbs 1:7)

&

We intend to demonstrate that human
perception is never taken lightly:
Therefore, forearm for the bite!

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Foreword

As South Sudan prepares for its anticipated general elections in 2026, the role of human rights defenders (HRDs) remains crucial in safeguarding democratic principles, promoting civic engagement, and ensuring electoral transparency. However, amid growing political uncertainties, HRDs; including women and persons with disabilities face significant risks that threaten their safety, freedoms, and ability to operate effectively.

Amid rising political differences, diminishing civic space, and stringent regulatory frameworks, Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in South Sudan face persistent threats, intimidation, harassment, and surveillance. These challenges manifest in various forms, including arbitrary arrests, legal persecution, physical violence, and restrictions on freedom of expression and association. The electoral period, in particular, amplifies these risks, as HRDs focusing on governance, human rights, and electoral integrity often become targets of repression.

This empirical research provides an in-depth analysis of the election-related fears and primary protection concerns faced by South Sudan's human rights defenders. It captures firsthand experiences, testimonies, and perspectives from HRDs operating across different States, highlighting the pressing challenges they encounter. The study sheds light on the various forms of threats and risks they face, including intimidation, targeted attacks, digital and physical surveillance, and restrictions on civic space. The research enhances the urgent need for robust and comprehensive protection mechanisms to uphold the rights of HRDs and enable them to contribute meaningfully to the electoral process.

Beyond documenting these challenges, this study is intended to serve as an evidence-based tool for informing legislative, judicial, and policy responses aimed at creating a safer and more enabling environment for HRDs in South Sudan. It provides key recommendations for national authorities, civil society organizations, regional bodies, and international actors on how to strengthen protection measures, enhance security protocols, and ensure accountability for violations against HRDs. Furthermore, it reinforces the importance of aligning national laws and policies with regional and international legal frameworks that uphold the rights to freedom of expression, association, and participation in public affairs.

As South Sudan moves closer to its 2026 elections, it is imperative that all stakeholders work collectively to ensure that HRDs can carry out their work without fear of reprisals. Their role in safeguarding human rights, promoting democratic values, and fostering an informed and engaged electorate is indispensable. It is only through a concerted effort by government institutions, civil society, international partners, and the broader community that South Sudan can ensure a credible, inclusive, and peaceful electoral process that respects fundamental freedoms and human rights.

James Bidal
Executive Director
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Introduction

This report examines the perceived election fears and threats faced by Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in South Sudan. The findings are based on recent research and surveys conducted by the South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network (SSHARDN) across 6 major cities of South Sudan.

As South Sudan prepares for its first general elections envisioned to take place in December 2026, SSHARDN Secretariat embarked on research aimed at understanding the potential risks and threats the (W)HRDs, journalists and activists were anticipating during the election period. While collecting perception views, references were made to neighboring countries' elections as well as South Sudan's previous general elections while still in Sudan and the drastic political changes that have happened since then.

What responses and protection mechanisms are in place and what additional support mechanisms should SSHARDN secretariat put in place in order to respond to election threats and protection concerns that might arise during the period.

South Sudan underwent rapid contextual and geopolitical changes during the data collection that commenced in July 2024. Significantly in September 2024, the Unity Government has announced a 24-month extension of the transitional period, postponing the elections until 2026. This marks the second delay since the signing of the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan¹.

Background and Context

South Sudan has faced significant challenges in its civil and political spaces leading up to the forthcoming general elections. The country has a history of conflict, corruption, and inadequate infrastructure like poor roads connection between the capital city and the other major cities across the country, which have hindered the development of a stable democratic system. The civil war that broke out in 2013 exacerbated these issues, resulting in widespread violence and displacement of civilians hence rendering many major towns of South Sudan dangerous to live in for humanitarian workers².

The political landscape in South Sudan is characterized by a lack of political parties with clear ideologies³ and agendas, as well as a dominant ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Government (SPLM-IG) that has faced allegations of human rights abuses and autocratic tendencies. The government has also been criticized for limiting freedom of expression and cracking down on dissenting voices, further restricting civic and political spaces⁴.

As the country prepares for its general elections previously scheduled for December 2024 but now in 2026, there are concerns about the integrity of the electoral process, including issues related to

1 VoA report on the peace signing

<https://www.voanews.com/a/south-sudan-s-warring-leaders-sign-peace-deal-to-share-power/4514628.html>

2 OCHA Report on reliefweb about killings of humanitarian worker.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/acting-humanitarian-coordinator-south-sudan-marie-helene-verney-condemns-killing-humanitarian-worker#:~:text=According%20to%20OCHA%20statistics%2C%20four,in%20the%20line%20of%20duty.>

3 Independent opinion article on understanding SPLM

<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/opinion-understanding-the-splms-name-but-not-its-ideology-is-the-failure-to-understand-the-partys-and-south-sudans-problems>

4 OHCHR October 2023 report findings on South Sudan entrenched repressions

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/south-sudan-un-inquiries-report-finds-entrenched-repression-imperils>

voter registration, transparency, and security. The international community has called for free and fair elections to ensure a legitimate and inclusive political transition in South Sudan. Overall, the civil and political spaces in South Sudan remain fragile and in need of significant reforms to foster a more inclusive and democratic governance system.

With South Sudan being in the election period, subsequently, rampant attacks on civil society voices became a norm. Over the last year, since the creation of the 24-month roadmap⁵ to the end of transitional period in South Sudan, civil liberties have largely been negatively affected. Arrests, detentions, intimidations and above all, a declining civil society collective strength. From January to March 2024, SSHRDN recorded a minimum of 3 significant and vocal civil society members targeted for intimidations, threats and harassments from the state's actors⁶. Also, in the same period, previously vocal civil society members seem to have self-censored themselves by the evidence of chilling effect on civil society⁷.

In Western Bahr El Ghazal State (Wau town), a leading women's rights activist was threatened and abused when she commented on what seemed to have been politically instigated inter-communal conflict in the town. For fear of her family (children and husband) she had to employ the layback-strategy⁸ for a while. Her colleague, a prominent member of the civil society coalition in the state was equally threatened but continued engaging with the State authorities while advocating for a safer Way^{9, 10}.

With the political context, history, prevailing situation in the country and the records of the civil liberties position-captured in stories given above; *What are the primary concerns of (women) human rights defenders across South Sudan regarding election security and their own safety during the forthcoming general elections in December 2026, and what measures do they believe are necessary to mitigate these potential risks?*

What measures are necessary to mitigate potential risks posed by election period in South Sudan?

Civil society will play a crucial role in setting the tone for democracy and good governance in South Sudan. *How much investment into their safety and protection do we need to see in order to have HRDs/journalists and activists actively involved in election discourse without fear of repressions for the purpose of realizing a democratically progressive South Sudan?*

Activists, political critics, election commentators as well as other politicians from opposition political parties are finding themselves curtailed, harassed and targeted by the government and the security agents, posing a serious threat to activists and (women) human rights defenders.

For a very long time the National Security Service (NSS) has been accused of taking police powers, carrying out arrests, detentions and even prosecute some critics and activists. In February 2023,

5 News article on South Sudan peace extension roadmap

<https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/amending-south-sudans-revitalized-peace-agreement-implications-extension-and-its-roadmap>

6 The targeted attacks, harassments and intimidations to the civil society members is in reference to the SSHRDN protection team's cases database.

7 Report by OHCHR on civic space in South Sudan

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/cohrsouthsudan/A_HRC_54_CRP.6_0.pdf

8 Lay-back strategy: 'HRD chooses to self-censor and sometimes remain silent' as defined by the research respondent

But as per English meaning with the Cambridge Dictionary, it entails a situation where one does not worry and bother with things/matters anymore.

9 Ruling party in Wau stern warnings

<https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/wau-splm-chairman-intimidates-critics-ahead-of-kiirs-visit>

10 Eye radio report on a threat to an activist based in Wau

<https://www.eyeradio.org/wau-based-activist-reports-being-threatened-after-students-protest/>

Morris Mabior Awikjok¹¹, a prominent government critic was abducted from Nairobi, extradited back to Juba where he was arbitrarily held in the NSS facility, charged for treason and released on November 8, 2024 following directives issued by the national Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, Hon. Ruben Madol Arop. The office of the higher commissioner for human rights in its October 2023 report¹² on South Sudan's curtailment of the democratic and civic space, highlighted Morris Mabior plight among many others as example of how dangerously it was becoming for the civil society members and government critics in this period leading to Elections.

For other political parties and their officials, it is no different. On the 11th of March 2024¹³, the leading opposition party, Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Opposition (SPLM-IO), a significant signatory to the 2018 peace agreement, had twelve of its members barred from travelling to a county in the Upper Nile region where they were expected to set up base in preparations for elections. 10 days prior to that, the party's leadership through its deputy chairperson, had expressed dissatisfaction at how closed up the democratic space was in the country and thus the SPLM-IO decision to boycott the-by then, December 2024 elections¹⁴.

The NSS ex-chief spy himself was disarmed and put under house arrest-banned from travelling¹⁵ in November 2024. And a heavy gunfire erupted¹⁶ at his residence a week later where reports of ironically-attempted '*arrests without warrant*' (*The notorious NSS Act 2014 provisions used against its former implementor*) emerged.

These election-related trends and the usual attacks, threats, harassments, censorship and detentions to journalists, civil society and (W)HRDs and more recently-prominent political figures, have been indicating potential threats and risks (W)HRDs/activists are to deal with.

Methodology

The research employed different methods to collect data. In person, virtual and physical interviews were the main methodology the researcher(s) used. Guided by semi-structured questions that allowed respondents to provide adequate well-articulated perceptions on the potential threats and risks. Additionally, the use of group brainstorming/discussion was used for best protection approaches and building up of referral pathway for HRD protection during election period in South Sudan. Added with the above major methods, the research invested heavily on desk research in order to get critical overall perspective from neighboring countries as well as countries that have previously gone through elections with a highly restrictive space for (W)HRDs and civil society like in South Sudan.

This empirical research had a total of 40 respondents from 5 major towns, Yei, Bor, Rumbek, Yambio and Wau where from the total, 19 were engaged individually and 21 were engaged in a

11 A report on resurfacing of Morris Mabior after disappearance

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/29/south-sudan-disappeared-critic-resurfaces>

12 OHCHR report on South Sudan civic space

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/cohrsouthsudan/A_HRC_54_CRP.6_0.pdf

13 Sudans Post news article

<https://www.sudanspost.com/splm-io-officials-blocked-from-travelling-to-panyigor-county/>

14 Radio Tamazuj report on SPLM-IO decision to boycott elections

<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/splm-io-decides-to-boycott-december-elections>

15 Sudans Post on General Akol Koor situation after sacking

<https://www.sudanspost.com/ex-spy-chief-general-akol-koor-disarmed-put-house-arrest-in-juba/>

16 Reports of heavy gunfire in Juba

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/heavy-gunfire-erupts-south-sudans-capital-juba-reuters-reporter-2024-11-21/>

focus-group discussions in Bor, Rumbek and Wau-with each of the 3 towns having 7 participants for the focus-group discussion. These towns were selected because they had recently recorded public participation on the constitutionally enshrined civil liberties by carrying out public protests in the past 24 months. Group discussions were conducted in those three towns because, Yei and Yambio had recently recorded internal violence that rendered group meetings risky. From Juba, 10 individual research respondents were reached and engaged in person. The Juba respondents were mainly civil society members who are actively involved in the elections process, in terms of monitoring its process.

The research was guided in a manner that it concentrated on issues. Unless prior public knowledge, mentioning of names, or other identifying details, is ‘**NOT**’ captured in the report.

Necessary authorities on the ground and colleagues in the SSHRDN protection department in Juba were constantly engaged to ensure a clear security plan is drawn up while engaging the respondents on the ground.

The ‘Do No Harm’ principle, was keenly emphasized and researchers were vigilant with any level of distress arising during or after the engagement.

Public perceptions on Elections in South Sudan (The ‘Ahwuuuuuuuu’ situation)

Conducted by an independent group of researchers in collaboration with the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform-UK (PeaceRep), an opinion poll that collected views of 4,769 people in 15 locations across all ten states and one administrative area, between March and June 2024, had 71% of them believing South Sudan was ready for elections by the December 2024 roadmap agreement¹⁷: However, majority of them said they felt ‘unsafe or ‘very unsafe’ to publicly engage in the country’s politics.

‘How can we be seen or heard actively talking about a certain politician without the National Security coming for you the next hour? We cannot talk freely!’ as echoed by one of the SSHRDN-research respondents. These sentiments confirm the report by PeaceRep of how concerned the civil population is of ‘unsafe’ election space in South Sudan.

How do the HRDs, journalists and activists feel about the elections



‘Its like we have been made to wait and seek for permission to start the discussion on Elections’ – Individual Respondent.

Civil society in general is not prepared for elections because of the confusion around the electoral process and the ongoing peace implementation that is proving to be disconcerting. There are no election parameters put in place for civic engagement that the civil society can leverage on considering the civic space is not free to start the conversation.

¹⁷ Poll reports by PeaceRep

<https://peacerep.org/publication/elections-and-civic-space-in-south-sudan/>

Speaking of Elections is not open because the government of National Unity, especially the ruling party SPLM-IG seems to control how other political parties' popularity. Other opposing political parties have a number of times accused the ruling majority party, SPLM of sabotaging or frustrating their rallies, in what the parties noted to be deliberate efforts by SPLM to stagnate their growth of membership. In March 2024, SPLM-IO was quoted to having threatened boycotting the then December-planned elections because of a number of challenges¹⁸. SSHRDN, through continuous monitoring of the civic space has uncovered that, civilians, mostly HRDs are in fear with reports of constant attacks by security officials for talking on elections-but more-so if not in support of the ruling party, SPLM-IG. Civil society members have been targeted and wrongly accused of either being rebels or belonging to opposing security sectors. Especially male civil society members in Yei town.

More often, the sitting government of national unity through the relief and rehabilitation commission has used national legal frameworks to curtail the work of the civil society. Most respondents mentioned situations where they have been caught between sticking to purpose as enshrined in the national legislations (NGO Act 2014 -*Humanitarian*) Vs promoting human rights in the country, which the government takes as opposition.

'Register your organization as a political party if you want to engage in political discourse' are some of the statements constantly issued verbally and written by senior government officials.

Talk and hide-the best option?

Majority of HRDs have to run away because of intimidations and threats. Ten vocal and active human rights defenders where 8 are males and 2 females left Yei in 2023. The activists reported to have left the town for fear of individual attacks on them because of having open discussion on elections. Yei is an active rebel area. National Salvation Front are active in the town and thus constant accusation of mobilizing for the rebels.

In June 2024, the Commissioner of Yei River County, reported increasing abductions¹⁹, particularly for the purpose of armed groups seeking a boost in their ranks. Evidences of such behaviors has made it easy to point fingers at civil society members in Yei; they are easily accused of being rebels or informants.

'If SPLM people get you, they say you are for rebels, if IO get you, they say you are an informant for IG, so it is with Thomas Cirilo men (NAS)-they accuse you of being a spy for the government' lamented by one of the exiled HRDs.

Many of the civil society members in Yei believe that Counter Military Intelligence Unit of the SSPDF, commonly referred to as 'Counter' was in good faith, however it has been majorly misused by some unprofessional personnel in the unit who harass, intimidate and at times detain or kill members of the society including the civil society and later easily blame it on the existence of rebels in the area.

¹⁸ News article from VoA on SPLM-IO threats to boycott elections.

¹⁹ 'Alleged denied entry to administrative areas and hampered rally organization' as sighted from the article

<https://www.voafrika.com/a/splm-io-election/7514095.html>

¹⁹ UNMISS report on Yei

<https://unmiss.unmissions.org/security-threats-poses-concern-yei-communities-unmiss-asks-assist>

Tracing of HRDs, activists and dissenting voices actions both in person and online is so common. High infiltration by the security agents, especially by the National Security Service has made it easy to know where one stays and what one does. Someone so close to you, a friend, a distant cousin or sibling can be used to be your compromise. In 2021, this intense surveillance was highlighted by Amnesty International's report '[These walls have ears](#)'

Likewise, in Bor-Jonglei State, the space is shrinking; two of the leading civil society members from leading organizations in the town (Intrepid-SS & JCSN) were shut down due to demonstrations in the town center. The incident that happened in late June into early July 2024, left Bol Deng Bol, a prominent HRD-who is the chairperson of the Jonglei Civil Society fled the country after days in hiding²⁰. This was after some of his colleagues including a journalist²¹ were reported to have been abducted or arbitrary arrested and detained without proper legal proceedings.

South Sudan in general is characterized by high levels of inter-tribal/clans clashes, revenge killings and government's heavy-handed rule in Rumbek, this is so evident with the way the governor of Lakes State has chosen to govern. In 2021, after his appointment, Governor Rin Tueny Mabor introduced a governance system in Lakes States on the pillar of strong role of Security Services in law enforcement (*Pospisil, 2023*²²). And in so doing, Rumbek significantly became a fearful town to be lawless, especially for killers and murderers. However, this was believed to have given the security apparatuses excessive powers. Restriction of movement in the name of keeping security and order were highly recorded and majority of the civil society members fell victims. It has sent a chill-effect on the populace in Lakes State.

Wau is divided: It is under the governorship of the SPLM-IO, but there is heavy support of the ruling SPLM-IG. The State security checks itself by virtue of almost 50:50 power balance by the two prominent parties. Activists/human rights defenders including women and journalists have reported being pressured to align with one side or the other, and face harsh criticism from both opposing sides if they speak out against them.

'They directed us to be loyal to them-each one wants us to favor them. They always target some of us which made most of us silent. If you talk or report, you will receive threatening messages/calls. Most often we chose to be silent or hide information for our own safety' Journalist from Wau

Equally in Yambio, the two leading political parties have some disparities affecting the work of civil society exacerbated by ongoing deadly clashes especially in Tambura County^{23,24}.

Unofficial 'State of Emergency' automatically in place by virtue of intimidations and threats by security organs in towns experiencing acute conflicts like Yambio has been used to monitor the work of civil society members. SSHRDN enumerators could not carry out the intended focused group discussion because, 'the state government is always ready to arrest and detain any gathering

20 Bol Deng Bol flee country

<https://www.sudanspost.com/south-sudan-activist-flees-country-amid-nss-search/>

21 UJoSS tried pushing for the release of a detained journalist in Bor

<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/journalists-union-push-for-members-release-in-bor>

22 Changing Lakes State?

A briefing paper by Jan Pospisil, November 2023)

23 First news report of clashes in Tambura for the year 2024

<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/tensions-continue-tambura-unmiss-and-authorities-conduct-assessment-mission>

24 Second report in a news article of clashes in Tambura for 2024

https://www.everadio.org/unmiss-beefs-up-security-amid-fresh-conflict-in-tambura/#google_vignette

deemed to be a threat to the fragile security.’ In September 2024, the State Relief and Rehabilitation Commission was quoted to have acknowledged that they had put measures through introduction of a parallel new certificate of registration to operate in the State in order to monitor the operations of all the NGOs working or planning to work in the State²⁵.

Echoing: Silence and self-censorship have become the only feasible choices for human rights defenders. This has gradually been imposed on the populace through intimidations, threats, harassment, and political maneuvering across South Sudan mainly by the security officials and leading political figures.

“ ***‘The Governor, Deputy Governor and mayor asked CSOs to write a document and assurance that there will not be any demonstration in Bor’*** – As said by a respondent.

‘.....and for them, they only protecting their positions’ – Continued the respondent when asked why the Jonglei State leadership had asked CSOs to write a commitment document to stop future demonstrations.

“ ***‘As a mother-a single mother, I am afraid for my children. If I am abducted/kidnapped my children will be vulnerable. Let me keep quiet at least.*** - Pleads a female respondent.

Laws, policies and practices affecting the work of HRDs, activists and journalists including women and PWDs around Elections.

"Laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times." - Thomas Jefferson

Many reports including the [U.S department of State 2023 report on South Sudan](#) indicate that the government of South Sudan decided to interpret the above statement by indeed capitalizing on the progress of the human mind of the South Sudanese and advanced the laws and practices in a manner that they repress the civil liberties in South Sudan. This is seen by how the government officials and members of the legislative continue to deduce ways to maintain strict control of media and information flow.

Following the 2021 introduction of a cybercrimes & computer misuse provisional order, the bill was in November 2023 officially passed to prosecute what a prominent national minister termed as ‘social media criminals.’ The order and thereafter, bill has in a number of times been sighted to be an intentional attempt by the national government to use law in limiting the rights of the civil population in the digital space.

²⁵ Radio Tamazuj report on the friction of the new directives of State RRC

<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/w-equatoria-ssrc-ngos-in-standoff-over-new-operating-certificate>

Earlier on, we briefly mentioned the NGO Act, 2015 of South Sudan that includes provisions that limit the scope of activities for NGOs to primarily humanitarian and voluntary work. Specifically, Section 6-which outlines the principles governing voluntary and humanitarian work, emphasizing that NGOs should focus on areas with greater needs and respect the sovereignty of South Sudan. Many activists, human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers do not see an extreme issue with this particular law in principle. However, it has been used as a basis for deregistering NGOs should they fall out with the country's leadership. For example, in 2021, the government of South Sudan ordered freezing of bank accounts as well as deregistering organizations alleged to be linked to the People's Coalition for Civic Action (PCCA)²⁶ without providing any justification. This move was seen as an attempt to suppress calls for peaceful protests and restrict civil liberties.

In July 2024, South Sudan parliament passed amendments to the 2014 National Security Service Act (Amendment Bill 2019). The contentious provisions, Section 54²⁷ and 55²⁸ that had necessitated the need for review in the first place were controversially passed. Following the passage of the National Security Service (NSS) Act, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights issued a note verbale to the government of South Sudan. This action was prompted by a concerted advocacy effort from various groups, including the South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network (SSHRDN), civil society organizations (CSOs), the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Opposition (SPLM-IO), the Opposition Political Alliance, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, members of diplomatic missions, and the United Nations Human Rights Council. These organizations and entities released statements urging the President of South Sudan to return the bill to parliament for further review, citing concerns about its implications for human rights and democratic governance. The parliament was left with no other choice other than urging the Ministry of Justice to reconsider taking the law back for further review and amendments amidst public outcry.

An activist sighted the fear of existence of some of these controversial laws. In their opinion, there are many examples of cases where this law has previously been used to arrest civil society members. Making reference to the 2021 crackdown of activists during the PCCA call for anti-government rallies²⁹. They fear that it can easily be used during elections as well. In November 2024 for example, the National Security Service provisions were used against its former spy chief that resulted into a sporadic gunfight.

'We do not have power by gun to fight back when they come for us' – Activist

Additionally, the NSS officers seem to misuse the institution's powers contrary to the law. For example, an activist sighted a situation where they write to the NSS for security clearance but they do not respond at all or rather they delay to approve the request. When the organization goes ahead with the activity, they make it a big case.

²⁶ PCCA time

<https://defenddefenders.org/south-sudan-unfreeze-civil-society-and-political-activists-bank-accounts-2/>

²⁷ NSS Act, 2014 – Section 54 (1)

Any person who is found committing any one of the offences against the state as provided under section 7 of this Act, or who is reasonably suspected of having committed, or having attempted to commit or being about to commit such an offence shall be arrested without a warrant by any service officer and detained.

²⁸ NSS Act, 2014 – Section 55 (1)

Where the Director General or an employee designated by him/her, has reasonable grounds to believe that a warrant is required to enable the Service to perform any of its functions under this Act, the Director General or the designated employee may apply for the issue of a warrant.

²⁹ Crackdown of activists that forced hiding of many

<https://www.theafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/activists-go-into-hiding-as-south-sudan-warns-against-protests-3532246>

Customarily, traditional norms and practices render women HRDs more vulnerable. WHRDs/ female activists fear their families and community because they look at activism as immoral. Culturally, and in most South Sudanese cultures, women are meant to be submissive and ruled over by men, and if a woman is so much heard to be vocal-she is always termed as ill-mannered and lacks respect. At times, a woman HRD that is vocal is also blamed on her family or husband if married and this makes their close family members to oppose their activism. On a positive note, otherwise, the women HRDs interviewed think that this vulnerability can be used during elections. According to the woman HRD, she believes that the security operatives fear to arrest women because it can bring shame to them (The arrestor) in the eyes of the community or their families and husbands might reiterate and cause unnecessary conflict.

In general, most interviewed HRDs, journalists and activists believe that the prevalent ignorance of law across all sectors, and levels play a great role in the misuse of law. *'The people, civil society members, HRDs and law enforcers are equally all ignorant. Invest in mass awareness.'* The prevalence in the level of ignorance for law increases the abuse of power when civil society want to freely participate in promoting a peaceful fair and well-informed elections.

Public discussions of national laws can be very helpful in gathering support for the protection of activists, journalists and human rights defenders. This can be made a reality by ensuring the civil society engage in negotiations with the government to allow such public engagements on law awareness to the people.

Abductions & enforced disappearance on the rise!

A lot of abductions by any of the organized forces of the security organs are on the rise. This has mainly been recorded for male Youth in Juba, Yei, and Bor.

From the disappearance of a renowned South Sudan's National Security Service critic, Mr. Morris Mabior Awikjok in February 2023³⁰-to a disappearance without trace of a youth activist; the Executive Director of the Junubin Chronicles, Mr. Biar Ajak in October 2023³¹, and the recent abductions of two members of civil society in September 2024 in Yei³², most civil society members are fearful of being abducted in the time leading to elections-for minor reasons including failing to support a specific candidate.

One of the activists was critical with how those perceived to be very vocal are subjected to verbal intimidations and threats of forcefully disappearing them for good should they insist on continuing with their activism.

'Most HRDs/activists have been forcefully displaced or disappeared. Some have been continuously threatened and made to flee. Others have had friendly advices from some military personnel to leave the town for their safety. Which is a good thing because it shows there are still good people in a bad society'

30 Human Rights Watch closely monitored the situation of Morris Mabior

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/29/south-sudan-disappeared-critic-resurfaces>

31 Mr. Biar Ajak reported to have disappeared

<https://www.eyeradio.org/civil-society-groups-leader-reported-missing/>

<https://www.radiotamazui.org/en/news/article/opinion-unravel-rights-activists-mystery-disappearance#:~:text=It%20is%20almost%20one%20year,Deng%2C%20the%20mother%20of%20Marol>

32 Two civil society members abducted in Yei

<https://onecitizendaily.com/index.php/2024/09/06/activists-abducted-in-yei/>

Most human rights defenders believe that, lack of accountability for crimes committed against journalists, activists and human rights defenders, usually by some ‘indiscipline’ members of mostly the National Security have incubated the culture of abductions, disappearance and forced exile, and the fear is during elections this shall be heightened.

‘Have friends close by at most times and let you be known of your activism for when they come for you, you are not disappeared without trace’ A call made by one of the leading activists to fellow HRDs as words of encouragement.

Even with friends, abductions still take place. On the 28th of October 2024, members of the South Sudan’s National Security Service walked into the offices of The Dawn English Daily Newspaper in Juba, held a meeting with its editor in chief, Mr. Emmanuel Monychol Akop before walking out with him and there has never been a trace of him since then. Family members, friends and colleagues have not had the chance to have access to him whatsoever with allegations of ‘held on administrative matter by the NSS’ often reported back by those who attempt to assist.

‘Tapping:’ A rampant illegal surveillance (South Sudan is Watching?)

In 2018/2019, Anataban Art Initiative³³, a prominent artistic youth movement was always in the news for news breaking ‘artivism’. South Sudan is Watching, a joint initiative by civil society members monitoring the peace agreement implementation then-was famously popularized by the group that a National Security officer upon engaging with the group’s leadership used the phrase ‘*Mush, South Sudan is watching and we are also South Sudan? We are also watching-ke!*’ The statement made was in efforts to assert and instill knowledge on the group that, the State is always watching whatever they are doing should it be against the state.

In February 2021, Amnesty International released a report ‘These walls have ears-The chilling effect of surveillance, on the level of surveillance the state had on the civil population. It was evident of how this intentional act by the State through the intelligence gathering institution had sent a chill effect to so many civil society members.

In 2024, phone tapping for ‘suspected’³⁴ HRDs has become rampant that even friendly calls put others in trouble. For example, the HRDs that left the country and continue to do their activism while in exile have been linked to those still within the country. The security personnel shift their focus on those within the country because either they have tapped the friendly conversations with their brothers/colleagues, or they suspect they are feeding them information.

³³ Various reports on Anataban work in South Sudan

<https://rejuvenate.global/organisation/anataban/>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04ddzht/p04dc9w8>

<https://forsouthsudan.com/anataban-sings-black-tide-a-capella-version>

³⁴ ‘Suspected’ as used by the NSS officials is to refer to anyone that has directly or indirectly been so vocal against the state and/or the NSS agency’s conduct of business.

One of the journalists interviewed reported to have been summoned to a security office in August and was shown a text chat they had with a colleague in which in real sense it contained nothing much than just updating each other on how things were in the country while they are away. This was used as a method to inform the journalist to be careful on how they engage because they are being monitored on all platforms.

'Social media and FaceBook posts are seriously tracked that you can be called to explain what you meant by your post. So, someone might misunderstand your simple post.' – Activist

Issues like poor roads, insecurity on the road, poor water, poor health facilities, control and check by unnecessary blocks at the checkpoints and salary payment of civil servants have been simple issues people are called in to explain.

'Even for food security topic. They will forgive you for food but call you to explain what you meant by security' humorously told by a respondent.

The South Sudan is
Watching Campaign
poster (2018)



Arbitrary Detentions and Torture

Media reports of detention of activists, HRDs, journalists and even members of the public including persons with disabilities are on the rise in South Sudan. Some of the detained individuals give reports of torture while in detentions. In May 2024, 7 civilians were locked up in a container and died of suffocation in Warrap State³⁵.

In a [press release](#) by the United Nations following the report by a joint effort of the UN Human Rights office and the UN mission in South Sudan, concerns of arbitrary detentions were recorded. According to the press release, some 1,140 civilians were reported to have been arbitrarily arrested in a space of 17 months by May 2024. Some of whom are women and children. Civil society have echoed such incidences and records of arbitrarily arrested members of the civil society and journalists detained are alarming.

In places like Yei for example, arbitrary arrests by counter-military³⁶ intelligence is so rampant. The direct threats by the military personnel have become so rampant and it leads to HRDs and activists' self-censorship.

'Security apparatus operate out of the law and may do certain things during elections. That is my fear' – As said by a lawyer

³⁵ 7 in Kuajok suffocate to death

<https://www.radiotamazui.org/en/news/article/7-suffocated-to-death-in-kuajok-after-being-locked-in-containers-by-sspdl>

³⁶ Counter Military Intelligence is a unit of different military units and/or different military personnel coming together to form one umbrella unit for a specific course of countering an immediate threat. In the case of Yei, to tackle the presence of rebels in a close vicinity

Infiltration and buy-offs of HRDs, activists and journalists

There have been recent concerns of ‘economic human rights defenders who can easily be bought off by the system’.

South Sudan is one of the poorest countries in the world with data from World Bank indicating that more than 80% of the population live under the poverty level of less than \$2 per day. In 2016, when the World Bank released its [report](#), it projected South Sudan to have a GDP per Capita growth³⁷ at a rapid speed, but with concerns of the poverty levels not improving. This is partially attributed to the unemployment rate amongst the more able and innovative population. The youth unemployment rate is of high concern.

In 2023, [Statista](#) put the unemployment rate of the youth³⁸ in South Sudan at 18.15%. A slight increase from 12.96 in 2022. This survey data was based on the assumption that the South Sudanese youth age range is between 15 to 24. Most of the youth able to get employment are in the private sector-more especially in the non-governmental sector and small-scale businesses.

Most interviewed journalists, HRDs and activists believe that it is very likely that some young people might be susceptible to bribery or other forms of influence. Essentially, they worry that these young individuals could be tempted by offers of money or other benefits to betray their peers. This betrayal could include providing information about their colleagues' activities, movements, or plans to those in power or the NSS.

The concern arises from a lack of trust and the recognition that economic or social pressures might lead some individuals to act against the interests of their own colleagues or cause. This fear of infiltration and betrayal can create an atmosphere of suspicion and undermine solidarity among activists and defenders.

‘Using the activist/(W)HRDs or brain wash to join politics, and some CSO members used by being promised positions or money has been silently rumored but it is likely to be a big problem if not looked into properly. Because they know youth are poor and desperate’ A woman HRD

Sexual objectification is a threat to a society struggling to promote women’s empowerment.

³⁷ South Sudan Projection report by ISS Africa

<https://futures.issafrica.org/geographic/countries/south-sudan/#:~:text=Based%20on%20the%20%241.90%20threshold,in%20the%20Horn%20of%20Africa.>

³⁸ The African Union (AU) defines youth as people between the ages of 15 and 35, however South Sudan youth is not a fixed biological category but a fluid social construct.

South Sudan Youth social construction

South Sudan’s former national Minister of Youth, Sports and Culture, Dr. Albino Bol was at the age above 40 by the time of his appointment to the ministerial position whose holder is supposed to be a youth according to the 2018 South Sudan Peace Agreement. South Sudan’s Youth Policy document which was in June 2024 finally passed after years idle-sitting in the parliament, encompasses definition of a youth in South Sudan. And it clearly states that anyone between 15 and 35, is a youth. Additionally, many social media posts about our young national leaders, for example; Denay Chagor-the former State governor of Jonglei, Hon. Puot Kang-the current national minister of petroleum, have a number of times recorded to be confirming that they are still considering themselves youth.

South Sudan faces deep-rooted challenges regarding gender equality and women's empowerment, exacerbated by conservative social norms and the legacy of conflict. These cultural and social settings exacerbate inequalities heightening vulnerabilities for women, contributing to high rates of gender-based violence and limited access to resources and opportunities. In collaboration with Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International in 2022, we produced a detailed document on what the government of South Sudan should consider as the 10 priorities³⁹ human rights areas. Women and girls' rights were pertinent to realizing a just and progressive South Sudan. A number of actionable recommendations were captured in the document that can be helpful in addressing these inequalities and violations they bring to women and girls.

Women human rights defenders have for long complained of being treated as sexual objects in many discussions about human rights. Most have been subjected to leave activism since it has been equated to 'prostitution' as per some of the women HRDs/activists interviewed.

'WHRDs representation is low due to cultural norms. Existing ones have a number of times sexually assaulted but they cannot report because our traditional norms do not see them as violations to women'

Against All Odds⁴⁰ highlighted challenges the South Sudan's socio-cultural set-up has brought upon women and girls. Some of which exacerbate the constant abuses they face including rape and sexual assaults.

In May 2022, SSHRDN secretariat saw the need to introduce a specific protection person to mainly focus on engaging and listening to women HRDs, and since then we have had more women HRDs seeking our protection and emergency response programs as shown in the graph below in comparison to the previous project phase (2018-2020).

³⁹ 10 human rights priorities for South Sudan

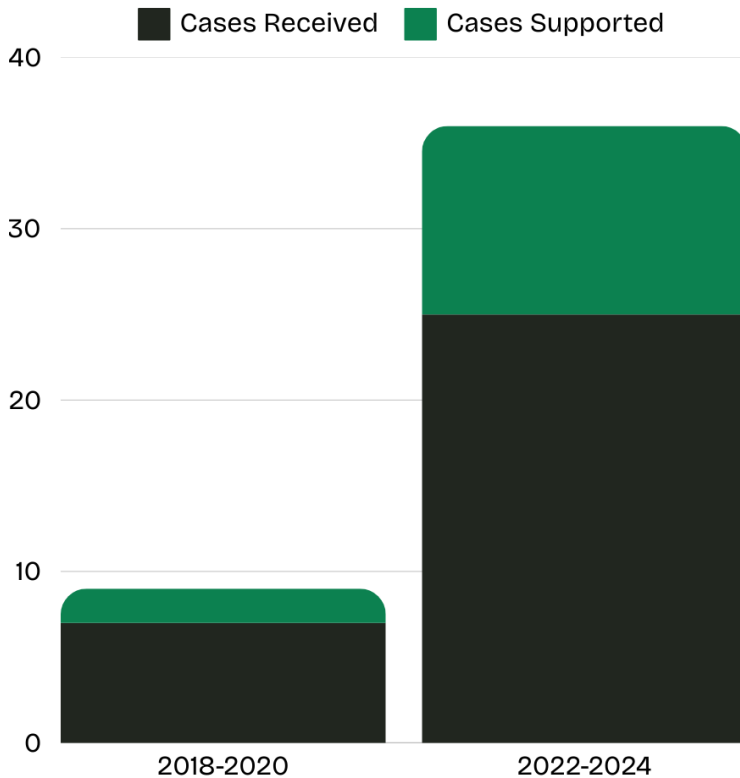
https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/03/south-sudan-human-rights-priorities-government-south-sudan#_Rights_of_women

Wanjeri, 2021 - PROMOTING WELLBEING, MENTAL HEALTH AND SELF-CARE FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN KENYA

<https://defenderscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PROMOTING-WELLBEING-Draft-Text.pdf>

⁴⁰ Against All Odds: A joint research on the situation of women human rights defenders in South Sudan

<https://sshrdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Against-All-Odds-1.pdf>



Summary

2018 - 20: **Received 11 and supported 2 Women HRDs**

2022 - 24: **Received 25 and supported 11**

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) are afraid to speak out about many human rights violations due to the risk of being sexually objectified, which impacts them physically, professionally, and psychologically (Wanjari, 2021). Additionally, they are also vulnerable to pressure through targets to their immediate family members. One female HRD sighted the fact that being a widow makes restrains her ability to be vocal because, if they fail to get her, they can easily come for her children.

'Here, if you are a female, and they arrest you by the National Security or any other agency, you will never find peace when you come out. You normally lose your dignity in the eyes of the community. They will keep talking about you everywhere. It can cause problem in your family' - Woman HRD

In the digital space, women human rights defenders face so much backlash that most of them tend to stay away from conversations online. Even leading female activists have a number of times faced rebukes on social media because of being vocal.

'We have been called names; they have said we are Mara Sakit⁴¹ and meant to be just at home cooking for our husbands and leave the streets for prostitutes' – A women's rights advocate

⁴¹ Mara Sakit is an Arabic phrase loosely translated to say just a woman.

Administrative and capacity inadequacies are a poison in the vein of civil society.

Organizational challenges in terms of civil society management affects collective effort for a safer space during elections. Lack of corporation between grassroots HRDs and those in Juba with better infrastructure is causing a disunited voice on the ground. Many activists, defenders and journalists believe that, the civil society environment today mostly lacks a sense of direction in terms of what they want. Many have pointed out the previous exodus of veteran civil society members who were forced to flee the country because of one reason or the other. They feel that unity that was there during the past years before the PCCA⁴² and the subsequent targeting of the leading members of the civil society might have caused a disunited sense of direction.

According to most of the respondents, there was a general concern with how unprofessional and shortchanged some of the current journalists, HRDs and civil society members easily put themselves in trouble. Framing of words and how they carry out their activism puts the wider civil society at risk.

'Funding scrambling and disunity among the members of the civil society network is causing disadvantage in collective fight for a better civic space. Strengthening the coalition's unity particularly at the leadership level is of greater essence.' - A leading activist

The danger in unbalanced and suspicious political landscape

South Sudan is highly divided along ethnic and tribal lines. After the 2013^{43,44} and 2016^{45,46} subsequent wars in South Sudan, many armies are divided along tribal lines. Equally, the political parties were divided along the tribal lines as well. SPLM-IO for example is predominantly popular with the Nuer community while the SPLM-IG is popular with the Dinka community. The armies have similar settings while the parameters of the 2018 Peace Agreement are not yet met, political parties still defer greatly in ideologies. A number of clashes and frictions among the political parties and their respective armies have constantly been reported. The 2018 [Peace Agreement to end conflict in South Sudan](#) divided administration of States into these political parties and civil society have found it challenging to maneuver in States where the political parties differences causes rift, posing a major risk in civic and political spaces.

In many towns, for example, SPLM-IG has monopolized activities. In Yei- there are unconfirmed reports of Juma Ismael constantly being called and threatened when he tries to popularize his political ideology as an independent person. In 2023, there were reports of a number of foul cries by opposition parties on how the SPLM-IG was mistreating other political parties. In Lakes States,⁴⁷ members of opposition parties who hold ministerial positions in the State government

⁴² Peoples Coalition for Civic Action was a popular uprising in 2021 that called for countrywide protest against the government because of its failure to deliver. See link below.

<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/08/28/South-Sudan-security-forces-arrest-activists-amid-crackdown-fears>

Various news reports on the two wars in South Sudan 2013, and 2016

⁴³ <https://www.c-r.org/programme/east-and-central-africa/south-sudan-conflict-focus>

⁴⁴ <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/conflict-between-dinka-and-nuer-south-sudan>

⁴⁵ <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/south-sudanese-civil-war-2013/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36762831>

⁴⁷ Lakes States opposition politicians decries poor working relations with the SPLM-IG

cited poor working relations and constrained communication with their SPLM party counterparts due to lack of political will on the part of the latter. Equally in Jonglei State, the Governor (now former)-who was a member of the opposition parties' coalition had countable rifts^{48,49} with his deputy who is from the SPLM-IG. He (the governor) was in a number of times cited in the press releases and media reports of disrespect and overstepping of his mandate. In Wau similarly the governor and her deputy have not been in agreement with most of the State's affairs including the cantonment sites.

Some state governments, along with influential political leaders within the states, have issued directives prohibiting journalists from conducting open interviews or interviewing ministers. They have also barred ministers from making statements to any media outlets or journalists. This decision stems from the labeling of human rights defenders (HRDs) as opposition by various political parties.

'Hard to interview any politician they think we are supporting the other party is always brandishing us names. If we ask difficult/ critical question, the manager should approve for us who to bring and what question to be ask.'
Radio broadcast journalist

Speaking about electoral process including about unbalanced political space or interference of the elections will result into activists/civil society to be misquoted and hence targeted.

'Whoever that touches their interest will always be targeted' – Journalist

But what is their interest?

It is hard to know since access to information in South Sudan remains a challenge, as authorities frequently label any attempt to obtain information as a pursuit of "classified" materials. This lack of transparency creates barriers for journalists, human rights defenders, and the general public, who struggle to access even basic information that should be readily available. This not only restricts freedom of expression but also hinders accountability and the flow of vital information necessary for informed decision-making and public awareness.

Interestingly, the NSS has disrupted a number of events including a simple public discussion on the constitutional making process⁵⁰ and the law reviews. Speaking out against inequalities in the community is also considered an issue according to many interviewees.

'I was arrested because I defended someone in the court of law, which the government think he should not be defended'-A lawyer

'I was summoned and interrogated because I talked about the women issues and their challenges that are given deaf ears here in Rumbek, where some are harassed detained and threatened for simple things like their rights to inheritance, and to right to own land. Since I am closed to a certain politician, they thought I was being used to destabilize and cause conflict'-Woman HRD

<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/opposition-decries-poor-working-relations-with-splm-in-lakes-state-government>

Reports of Jonglei State governor and his deputy rifts

48 <https://www.everadio.org/chagor-deputy-lock-horns-over-bor-land-leasing-probe/>

49 <https://www.sudanspost.com/jonglei-governor-deputy-disagree-over-investigation-of-ex-mayor/>

50 NSS disrupt a press conference in Juba

<https://www.sudanspost.com/nss-disrupts-press-conference-by-media-stakeholders-on-permanent-constitution-making/>

Most HRDs are fearful that the great political difference the parties have, and the subsequent conflicts the rifts cause in the communities like in the case of Western Equatoria-Tambura County,⁵¹ they (HRDs', activists and journalists) might be easy targets because of their popularity.

'During conflicts, for example if we have a pre- or post-election violence, they might come after us and later blame it on collateral damage'- Said a concerned activist

What are the suggested measures HRDs including women and persons with disabilities, activists, and journalists give to enhance their safety during election period in South Sudan.

To the South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network's Secretariat;

Continuous capacity building and increasing awareness on HRDs at the grassroots including women and persons with disabilities. It is essential to engage in continuous capacity building and enhance the awareness of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) at the grassroots level. By systematically profiling these activists, we can ensure that their efforts are recognized and acknowledged on a global scale. This visibility will empower the public to actively advocate for the freedom and safety of HRDs, especially during election periods when they are at a higher risk of arrest. By supporting these defenders, we can foster a safer and more just environment for all.

Adequate training on protection tools, risk assessment, Physical & Digital Security and media laws. Providing comprehensive training on various protection tools is crucial for ensuring the safety and security of individuals and organizations. This training should cover a wide range of topics, including risk assessment, physical security, digital security, and media laws.

1. **Risk Assessment:** Equip participants with the knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and mitigate potential threats. This includes understanding the likelihood and impact of different risks and developing strategies to address them.
2. **Physical Security:** Focus on measures to protect individuals and their physical surroundings. This training could involve learning about secure facility designs, access control, surveillance systems, and emergency response protocols.
3. **Digital Security:** Address the growing threats in the digital world. This includes training on how to protect sensitive information, use encryption tools, recognize phishing attempts, and implement secure communication practices.
4. **Media Laws:** Provide a thorough understanding of the legal landscape regarding media and communication. This includes learning about the rights and responsibilities of journalists, laws governing freedom of expression, defamation, and privacy rights.

By offering comprehensive training in these areas, individuals and organizations will be better prepared to navigate the complex and often hazardous environments in which they operate. This will not only enhance their safety but also enable them to carry out their work more effectively and confidently.

⁵¹ UNMISS briefer on the conflict in Tambura

https://unmiss.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/tambura_report_infographics_0.pdf

Continuously strengthening multisectoral relationship with the security personnel, political parties, faith-based groups, youth and engage the government and UNMISS Human Rights Division. Engaging these various stakeholders ensures that human rights issues are kept at the forefront of political discourse. By working with leaders and members of various stakeholders, it's possible to advocate for culture, policies and legislation that protect human rights defenders including women and HRDs with special needs. This collaboration can also help in planting an environment that is supportive of human rights and inclusive of diverse voices.

Putting in place emergency call lines (Hotlines) by the SSHRDN secretariat to be easily accessible across South Sudan by the human rights defenders in distress during elections time and beyond.

Actively & continuously promote and train civil society members, journalists, activists and individual rights defenders on strategic advocacy based on evidence-based approach. HRDs, journalists and activists will become empowered and hence effectively advocate for each other besides on issues making meaningful impact during elections.

Advocate and lobby the government to provide protection of people, HRDs and Activist through intentional policies and laws in relation to election times. By advocating and lobbying for these measures, we can create a safer and more supportive environment for HRDs and activists in South Sudan, particularly during the sensitive election periods when they are most at risk. This will enable them to continue their vital work in promoting human rights and social justice without fear of retribution.

Invest on more digital tools that have adequate security features that may provide extra protective layers to the activists, HRDs and journalists. Make available at all times useful digital tools that can benefit the HRDs and activists across the country.

SSHRDN Secretariat to intentionally continue actively engaging its members and other HRDs, activists, and lawyers in promoting risks transfer, and protecting each other. Building this culture through providing forums to build rapport amongst HRDs. AGM is a good platform.

Establish more safe houses and improve on the protection outreach SSHRDN is already providing through potentially conducting annual contextual analysis, situational research and mapping of protection services in order to expand and establish multi/inter-State referral pathway for the protection of HRDs during elections.

Train more paralegals as soon as possible, especially on women issues in order to help create an environment of more legal advisors across the country.

Strengthen relationship with NSS leadership in the 10 States and the three administrative areas, and state parliament especially in creating and promoting a space for positive criticism and advise in the States. This can be done through periodic states visit by the secretariat in coordination with the States' focal persons.

SSHRDN to continue identifying potential allies, help members in networking and building strong connections with different allies, both within and outside South Sudan. Or rather sharing the concern with a partner outside South Sudan so they can speak on behalf of SSHRDN during a critical situation regarding a human rights defender during elections time. Therefore, in the next 2 years establishing many regional and international allies will help in successfully and safely advocating for some of these protection issues that might arise during elections.

Establish a main crisis coordination team in Juba, along with smaller teams in each of the states. These crisis coordination teams will be activated once the election timeline is finalized and the electoral process has officially commenced nationwide. While doing this, make access to resources more efficient.

Closely working with other protection organizations both international and national will help mitigate some of the risks and threats HRDs face, mostly during elections. Providing emergency contacts for focal persons in these different organizations will be helpful.

Readily availing support resources in case of emergencies will enhance efficiency of support provided to activists, journalists and HRDs at risk before, during and after elections in December 2026.

Invest in data protection within SSHRDN secretariat as well as in the member organizations especially those closely working with the secretariat. Investing in data protection is crucial for safeguarding human rights defenders and their sensitive information. This investment entails several key components:

- a.) **Enhanced Security Measures:** Implement advanced security protocols and technologies to protect digital and physical data. This includes encryption, secure servers, and regular security audits to identify and mitigate vulnerabilities.
- b.) **Training and Awareness:** Provide comprehensive training for human rights defenders on data protection best practices. This includes educating them about safe data storage, secure communication methods, and how to recognize and respond to cyber threats.
- c.) **Access Controls:** Establish strict access controls to ensure that only authorized individuals can access sensitive information. This involves using strong authentication methods, such as multi-factor authentication and biometric verification, to prevent unauthorized access.
- d.) **Data Anonymization:** Implement techniques to anonymize data, reducing the risk of exposure in case of a breach. This involves removing personally identifiable information (PII) from datasets and using pseudonyms where possible.
- e.) **Regular Backups:** Ensure that data is regularly backed up and stored in secure locations. This not only protects against data loss but also allows for quick recovery in the event of an incident.
- f.) **Legal Compliance:** Adhere to data protection regulations and standards to ensure that the handling of data is lawful and ethical. This includes complying with local and international data protection laws, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- g.) **Incident Response Plans:** Develop and implement robust incident response plans to swiftly address data breaches and minimize their impact. This includes having a dedicated team in place to manage incidents and communicate effectively with stakeholders.

Investing in these data protection measures, can create a safer environment for human rights defenders, enabling them to carry out their vital work without fear of compromising their safety or the safety of those they support by the time of elections in December 2026.

To the donor community;

Help the CSOs in the next 20 months, to establish strong CSO networks in all the Ten (10) States and the three (03) administrative areas (solidarity/one voice). By fostering collaboration and communication among these organizations, we can create a united front that is better equipped to address various issues and advocate for positive change. These strong networks will enable CSOs to share resources, expertise, and best practices, ultimately enhancing their collective impact.

Moreover, a well-connected network of CSOs will facilitate coordinated efforts in policy advocacy, community engagement, and the promotion of human rights, ensuring that their voices are heard and their actions are effective.

To the transitional government of South Sudan;

Invest in carrying out a countrywide awareness about the constitution, and the country laws in order to also rely on community protection through informed population by the Elections period in December 2026.

Passionately and aggressively advocate for total independent judiciary and an establishment for a special court for election violations. Investing in reaching out to the government especially the concerned Ministry of Justice & Constitutional Affairs, The Presidency and the JRC to constitute the Judicial Reform Commission before the end of 2025, in which all judicial reviews will commence. The **Ad Hoc Judicial Reform Committee (JRC)** was inaugurated on July 28, 2022. This committee is tasked with reviewing relevant laws, advising on judicial reforms, and restructuring the judiciary to enhance its effectiveness.

To network members;

SSHRDN and its members to build a strong connection with the community by working with the States focal persons and the various clusters to have continuous community outreach. The community will be a useful protection unit for human rights defenders during elections.

Advocate and lobby the government to provide protection of people, HRDs and Activist through intentional policies and laws in relation to election times. By advocating and lobbying for these measures, we can create a safer and more supportive environment for HRDs and activists in South Sudan, particularly during the sensitive election periods when they are most at risk. This will enable them to continue their vital work in promoting human rights and social justice without fear of retribution.

Invest in AI for the protection of HRDs, for example improving digital forensic in the case of character assassinations of altered internet images.

Bank on the International community; create a platform for constant engagement and help in advising on the positive role on protection they can continue to play to diplomatically influence the government of South Sudan.

Actively dialogue with the law enforcement agencies to aware and empower them about the laws and hold them responsible and accountable if some individuals commit or violate the law.

Leverage the South Sudanese diaspora to provide swift responses whenever a Human Rights Defender (HRD) is in trouble. They can be relied upon to raise global awareness promptly and consistently, not just during election periods.

Making good use of media. Collaboratory working together by planning and programming for joint advocacy. Including both human rights defenders and journalists in trainings as well, will ensure close networking, understanding of issues affecting both teams and collectively address the challenges.

Having a joint advocacy strategy in every state for the various CSOs will help mitigate some unnecessary attacks and threats on individual HRDs. SSHRDN secretariat should therefore

consider empowering its members in the States by December 2025, in developing joint advocacy strategy around elections safety for HRDs.

Mentorship and peer support are essential components for the growth and effectiveness of civil society organizations. Therefore, it is imperative that the South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network (SSHRDN) invests in these areas throughout 2025.

Community chiefs and bishops/clergy men can be used to safeguard activists and civil society members that includes women HRD and journalists as well. Establish points of contacts for the, communities, faith-based institutions and churches and keep the comprehensive contact list by February 2026. The database needs to constantly be updated.

SSHRDN to continue to engage multiple stakeholders in dialogue, bringing them together to amicably resolve misunderstandings that cause friction. These stakeholder dialogues are increasingly important moving forward. Seeking collective solutions will significantly enhance the security and safety of HRDs, activists, and journalists during elections in South Sudan.

Conclusion

As the upcoming election in South Sudan approaches—let's hope it remains on track—it's crucial to continue supporting activists, human rights defenders, and journalists who serve as election monitors. By systematically monitoring, documenting, and campaigning tirelessly for a free and fair election process, we can significantly contribute to the pursuit of a democratic nation where the rule of law, human rights, and good governance prevail.

The country is scheduled to conduct its first general elections in December, 2026. The elections represent a critical step toward democratic progress, even though the country ranks poorly on global indices for human development, freedom, and corruption perception. Efforts to strengthen independent oversight bodies and build political institutions will be crucial for South Sudan's future.

This research was conducted to inform SSHRDN's preparations for interventions, ensuring they are positioned to respond effectively to potential threats facing human rights defenders (HRDs), journalists, and activists during the election period. By serving as election monitors, human rights defenders will play a pivotal role in promoting accountability and advocating for the protection of human rights throughout and following the elections.

Acronyms

SSHRDN – South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network
HRDs – Human Rights Defenders
WHRDs – Women Human Rights Defenders
NSS – National Security Service
PWDs – Persons with Disabilities
CSOs – Civil Society Organizations
(W)HRDs – (Women) Human Rights Defenders
SPLM-IG – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in Government
SPLM-IO – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in Opposition
UK – United Kingdom
NGO – Non-governmental Organization
IG – In Government
IO – In Opposition
NAS – National Salvation Front
SSPDF – South Sudan People’s Defense Forces
Intrepid-SS – Intrepid-South Sudan
PCCA – People’s Coalition for Civic Action
UN – United Nations
UNMISS – United Nations Mission in South Sudan
JRC – Judicial Review Committee
AGM – Annual General Meeting
AI – Artificial Intelligence
JCSN – Jonglei Civil Society Network



South Sudan
Human Rights Defenders
Network (SSHRDN)



South Sudan
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